

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 421

FL 016 901

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 TITLE Using Plays Proficiently in the Foreign Language Class.
 PUB DATE 87
 NOTE 11p.; In: Birckbichler, Diane W., Ed. Proficiency, Policy, and Professionalism in Foreign Language Education. Selected Papers from the 1987 Central States Conference; see FL 016 895.
 PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
 -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
 DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; Cultural Awareness; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); *Dramatics; *Language Proficiency; *Literature Appreciation; Media Selection; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; Second Language Instruction

ABSTRACT

The inclusion of plays in the foreign language curriculum can result in some of the most rewarding literary experiences for students. Using plays proficiently in the classroom can be much enhanced if the play is carefully chosen to suit the students' abilities, interests, and level of maturity. Pertinent cultural and historical background, adequate linguistic preparation, and the preparation of diagrams of the stage settings establish a solid basis for critiquing the play and discussing characterization, setting, plot, and literary devices. A pleasurable concluding activity can be some form of dramatization, either in class or, more ambitiously, for an outside audience. Students will benefit greatly from the experience by acquiring not only more proficiency in the target language but also a deeper appreciation of the many possibilities to be found in drama. (Author/MSE)

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6 Using Plays Proficiently in the Foreign Language Class

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Choosing Plays

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Reading a play from time to time in the secondary foreign language class makes a pleasant change of pace from other kinds of activities, provided that the play has been chosen with attention to the class level for which it is intended. Ideally, all plays, as well as other kinds of literature presented in the foreign language program, appear in the curriculum as a result of carefully planned objectives that span the entire foreign language sequence. Thus, when students begin a play, they will have the linguistic proficiency necessary to read it without the undue frustration that comes from having to look up too many unknown words and phrases. Their first experience is probably the most important in shaping their attitudes about reading more plays in the target language. As Marzi (6, p. 125) cautions,

It is well that students be introduced to a work that is easily understood, and therefore possibly appreciated, than to have them study a difficult work . . . which would close the door to any present or future interest.

There are many ways in which teachers can determine whether a text is appropriate for a certain level. For example, a readability formula can be used to evaluate the linguistic suitability of a given text; Schulz (10) describes one such formula, the Lix, which is suitable for French, German, and Spanish prose.¹ Purcell (9) suggests other factors that may

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be considered in choosing a play: class interests, suitability of the subject matter with which it deals, and the amount of time available for discussion in class. For those plays that are to be among the early reading experiences of the students, it is generally wise to choose contemporary works that have characters with whom students can identify, and if there is some humor, so much the better. Tragedy, plays written in verse or highly colloquial language, or stylized pieces that depend heavily upon a knowledge of the social customs of a historical period for their understanding should be saved for much later.

Providing Background

After selecting a play suitable for a given level, a careful introduction to its reading helps ensure the students' understanding and enjoyment of the work. This introduction may take a wide variety of forms, depending on the type of play under consideration. Hunting (2, p. 538) proposes a number of preliminary meetings devoted to studying in the target language "the theater, its techniques, its vocabulary, the particular author in question, his period, his play, and its possible different interpretations."

Linguistic preparation is also a major consideration if the students will encounter unfamiliar language or verb forms in the play. For example, because of a reduced emphasis on the *vosotros* form in many Spanish programs in the United States, students who read a peninsular play for the first time may need some work with the new verb forms likely to be encountered. For the most part, however, the language structures encountered in a play are less difficult than those in a novel because lengthy narratives containing passages laced with descriptive adjectives or difficult metaphors—seldom used in conversation—occur less frequently. The exception is the play written in verse (often a "classic"), where special attention to the poetic forms used will probably be needed.

Some information of a historical or geographical nature is also frequently useful to help put the play's events into proper perspective. Alternatively, the students themselves can undertake, either individually or in groups, some directed research on these topics to share with the class. As Lewis (5, p. 251) points out, "In order to place literature in

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its proper milieu, either as part of or as a rejection of a social order, it is essential for a student, and especially today's student to understand what is called the culture and civilization of the particular country." This might include a discussion of a political system, regional customs concerning courtship, or the expectations about the roles of the sexes—any factor that will affect the motivations and actions of the characters in an important way. Because students tend to interpret the behavior of characters in a play from their own personal perspective, it often helps to provide insight into the constraints the culture has imposed upon the characters, and where appropriate, the playwright.

An interesting experiment by Nacci (8), in which he gave a surprise exam to 41 advanced undergraduate students to find out what Hispanic cultural insights they had gained from reading contemporary plays and novels in Spanish, revealed that while the students' cultural impressions were not necessarily valid, they still formed definite opinions, even without the help of the instructor. Although of course very limited in scope, the experiment suggests that teachers need to deal with cultural topics directly in order to avoid the erroneous conclusions that students might draw if left without appropriate guidance.

Cultural background can also be provided through visual media such as slides, movies, and television. The ready availability of videocassettes makes commercial films easier to use than ever, and a widening market means that a number of films on videotape are becoming available for use to provide background information of a cultural nature. Photographic slide units are still easiest for the individual teacher to prepare. With just a camera and an outline of useful slides, the teacher who visits the site where the play takes place can prepare an interesting and pointed narrative to illustrate prominent references in the play. The author prepared such a unit for *Corona de sombra* (*Shadow Crown*), by the Mexican playwright Rodolfo Usigli, a play to be read by classes in the second semester of the third year. The title of the play refers to the brief reign (1864–1867) of the Austrian Archduke Maximilian as Emperor of Mexico; the action takes place primarily in Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City. Slides of the castle and grounds, its chief rooms of state, and portraits of the major characters help the students visualize the setting that the playwright envisioned for his scenes depicting the emperor's tumultuous reign.

Setting the Stage

After providing useful cultural and historical background, students need to be sensitized to the idea of the play as a literary work that is designed to be seen and heard. Therefore, when the class begins a play, it is useful to discuss, for example, the advantages the playwright has over a novelist, the disadvantages the playwright faces, and the restrictions that the playwright must observe when writing a play. Because of the visual qualities inherent in drama, it becomes equally important to visualize the set. As Marzi (6, p. 126) suggests,

The student as reader should be encouraged to see himself or herself as a spectator, and to imagine what is taking place on the stage. This role gives new life to the text and prompts the students to be more creative in their thinking.

To help students visualize the setting, it is occasionally possible to provide the class with actual photographs of a production of the play. Because such photographs are not usually readily available, the construction of a diagram of the set according to the playwright's instructions becomes more expedient. This exercise helps not only to imagine the set, but also how the actors will move about, where they will be for important speeches, and the like. The teacher and the class should agree on certain conventional symbols on the diagram to represent doors, windows, kinds of furniture, etc., so that succeeding diagrams are quickly understood by all. Because stage language is somewhat technical, it is also necessary to introduce the students to this new terminology.

The teacher and class can construct the diagram of the first set together, perhaps on the chalkboard or an overhead projection. For succeeding scenes students can prepare their own diagrams first, then compare them with others in the class. The diagrams are useful while the students read the play and can serve as the basis for discussions after the play is read.

Students can also be asked to find pictures of people in magazines who they believe resemble the characters; the class can then vote on the best set of pictures. The pictures can be mounted on posterboard and moved around on the chalkboard with magnets (or masking tape if the

chalkboard is not magnetized) to show the characters' positions and movements in key scenes; Allen and Valette (1, p. 280) suggest that a flannel board be employed for the same purpose.

Discussing Plays

The three major components for the critique of a play are the same as they would be for the novel: plot, characterization, and setting. Of these, characterization generally assumes more importance than the other two simply because the characters are so visible and because the play is developed through dialogue rather than narration. As a result, discussion about the characters is generally the easiest to elicit. Students should consider who the protagonist is and what that person hopes to achieve in the play. Students need to understand that the protagonist can also be more than one person or even a group of people. The one who tries to prevent the protagonist from reaching his or her goal is then identified as the antagonist, which may be something other than a person—animals, ghosts, or the environment, perhaps. Characters may be compared and contrasted and analyzed from the point of view of their motivation and their importance to the plot. In this regard, consideration can be given to the minor characters: Why are they included? What do they contribute? Often a minor character has some key role to play in the resolution of the plot.

The importance of the setting should also be considered. The setting can have considerable impact on the action in the drama if it restricts the characters' movements in some way. For example, plays set in a historical period must conform to the conventions of that time, and the characters will be limited by the social expectations of the period. Similarly, if the setting is physically hostile to the characters—astronauts about to run out of oxygen on the moon, children lost in a forest, travelers stranded in the desert with little water—it will have a significant effect on what takes place. Often, however, the setting is of minor importance and students realize that the play could easily take place in any number of settings. If this is the case, students might speculate about why a certain setting was chosen by the author and whether the play might be equally or more effective in another.

A discussion of plot development will also include a consideration

of literary devices such as climax, *dénouement*, empathy, pathos, and symbolism. Because of the dramatic value of certain scenes, students will often identify one of them erroneously as the climax if they have not first determined that the climax is the point in the play where the protagonist either achieves his or her goal or the goal is irretrievably lost, perhaps with the death of the protagonist. The *dénouement*, or falling action, is then the part that explains what happens to the other characters. Not all plays have a *dénouement*, of course, and students could speculate about its absence.

Empathy, or the identification by members of the audience with certain characters in the play so that the observers feel themselves to be part of the action, is essential for the play to be a critical success. The really successful play projects empathy for its characters through merely reading it: the actual presentation of the play only serves to reinforce the empathy more strongly. Students should discuss whether or not they felt empathy while reading the play. Because the personal reactions of students to a play will differ, what will strike a chord in one student will be missed entirely by another. Therefore, discussions on empathy are often marked by a divergence of opinion.

Pathos, the ability of the author to have the reader or spectator feel pity for one or more of the characters, is closely allied to empathy. Used skillfully, pathos can bring tears to the eyes of the onlooker; if it is forced or artificial, however, the results will be bathos, or excessive sentimentalism, such as is often encountered in farce or melodrama. Instead of feeling sorry for the characters, the audience laughs at them.

Sometimes symbolism, unless it is very obvious, is often missed entirely by students. The reason that a character appears dressed in a certain color, for example, might have to be explained or, at least, indicated by asking questions about what the color might signify. The fact that the heroine first appears dressed in white may indicate her innocence; later, a red dress might show her loss of that quality; and still later a black dress might symbolize repentance. Physical symbolism of this kind, though, is much easier for the students to recognize than what might be termed "metaphoric" symbolism—when a character is symbolic of some quality less obvious, such as fate or death.²

Although a certain amount of the critique of a play should be from

the individual point of view, students will find it enjoyable and profitable to work in small groups to debate in the target language topics of discussion or to react to two or three questions concerning the areas discussed above. Students are told that, as a group, they should respond to the topics, but that whatever stance they take must be validated from the text of the play if they are challenged, either by the teacher or their fellow classmates. Typically, small group discussions last between twenty and thirty minutes, after which the teacher asks for group summaries. Groups frequently take differing positions on a topic and a lively discussion ensues.

For more advanced classes, Klein (3) approaches the critique of a play on an individualized basis, requiring the use of all four skills: students read the text for a written test, listen to an audio tape of the play for an identification test, give an oral presentation of a five-minute segment from the play, and write a two-page paper on an approved topic.

An excellent means for provoking discussion is to use recordings of the play in class, whether audio, video, or film. Audio recordings help to provide an appreciation of the dramatic force of the play and an acquaintance with special speech patterns characteristic of the stage, but nothing has an impact on the student like seeing the play once it has been read and discussed and to see it spring to life. In this respect, the most useful medium is the videocassette, because of its versatility and the ease of rewinding it to view a particular part again. As Svensson (11, p. 149) advocates,

Video helps to make complex verbal situations, relations, and procedures more understandable; it encourages creativity, it simplifies and clarifies foreign conditions, and it overcomes distances of time and space. All this should result in creating a favorable attitude toward the language and culture.

Student Dramatizations

Dramatizations of all or a portion of a play are also worthwhile learning experiences for students, whether in-class enactments or more formal productions for an outside audience. In addition to the insights that the production of a play provides about the playwright, characterization, and staging, it also allows considerable practice in the target language. Hunting (2), who has directed plays in French, maintains that

working in the target language allows for constant linguistic practice, thereby increasing students' vocabulary and improving their fluency. The language thus becomes a working tool rather than an academic exercise.

Because class time is limited, the teacher needs to decide in advance which plays lend themselves best to class participation and dramatization. Miller (7, p. 110) offers some practical advice and suggests questions that teachers should consider before choosing a play: (1) Who are the potential actors, and what are they capable of? (2) For whom will the play be performed? (3) What kind of play will suit the performance space available? and (4) How much rehearsal time can be given to the students?

After the play has been chosen, the teacher can select scenes for students to present, or groups of students can choose a scene from the play to enact. Each choice should have the approval of the teacher so that the scenes represent approximately the same amount of work. If the characters in a play have different amounts of dialogue, then one student can play two of the shorter roles. In order to focus on staging and characterization, it is better to ask students to memorize their roles, again ensuring that everyone memorize the same amount. Levy (4) suggests that the class be divided into groups of five to eight students to read four one-act contemporary plays with between two and five characters each. Students who do not have speaking roles are in charge either of class discussions about the author's style and major themes or of presentations about the author's life. The groups then make videotapes of their plays for viewing by the class, and each actor is responsible for presenting in the target language an analysis of the role he or she portrayed.

Videotaping of the scenes enacted by the students creates enthusiasm and adds a note of realism to the task; furthermore, students can discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their own performances, perhaps from the point of view of the playwright or director of the play. Although less desirable, audiotaping can also be of some value in creating interest in the activity. If a class or group of students is particularly enthusiastic about dramatizations, they can be asked to present scenes not only to their own class but also to other classes or an outside audience.

In the event that the play or selected scenes are shown to others, everyone should have clearly defined responsibilities with some announced penalty for failure to perform them. Students should try out for roles and volunteer for other jobs according to their abilities and interests. Those who are not actors can help with staging, costumes, makeup, props, and lighting. All students should, of course, receive a share of the credit in the program. For the teacher who is a novice director, a one-act play is perhaps a good first attempt. Often teachers discover that it does not take long to "take to" directing, especially if there are some talented drama students in the class who can offer advice and practical help. In fact, the teacher might well want to turn over directing duties to a student or students willing to assume the task.

Conclusion

The inclusion of plays in the foreign language curriculum can result in some of the most rewarding literary experiences for students. Using plays proficiently in the classroom can be greatly enhanced if the play is carefully chosen to suit the students' abilities, interests, and level of maturity. Pertinent cultural and historical background, adequate linguistic preparation, and the preparation of diagrams of the stage settings establish a solid basis for critiquing the play and discussing characterization, setting, plot, and literary devices. As already mentioned, a pleasurable concluding activity can be some form of dramatization, either in class or, more ambitiously, for an outside audience. In addition, students will benefit greatly from the experience, acquiring not only more proficiency in the target language but also a deeper appreciation of the many possibilities to be found in drama. All of which may cause students to echo in their own words the well-known sentiment of one of the world's greatest playwrights: "The play's the thing."³

Notes

1. For application of the Lix to French, German, and Spanish text, Bruce A. Beatie, Laura Martin, and Bethany Oberst, of Cleveland State University, in "Repetitions, Recognition, and Redundancy: A Pilot Experiment in Second-Language Reading Skills," a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, 1982, found that Spanish functions like German

- with the *Lix* as Schulz describes it, but for the French, words with apostrophes (e.g., *l'école*) and hyphenated words (e.g., *au-dessus*) must be counted as two words rather than as single words.
2. A play replete in metaphoric symbolism is the one-act drama *Los fantoches* (*The Puppets*) by the Guatemalan dramatist Carlos Solorzano.
 3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii, 641.

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